



CRITICAL CONDITIONS

WHAT TEACHER LEADERS NEED TO BE EFFECTIVE IN SCHOOL

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The Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program was designed in 2010 to build the capacity of Boston's teachers to be stronger professional resources for one another, their schools, and district reform. To this end, the program's key strategy has been supporting experienced teacher leaders to design and facilitate graduate-level leadership development courses for their peers.

To date, more than 100 teacher leaders holding roles such as team leader, content coach, data facilitator, or mentor have participated in this teacher-led professional learning to build the leadership skills needed to be effective in these roles.

A second, equally important strategy has been to study the experiences of these teacher leaders in order to identify the conditions most critical to their success and



to devise tools that can increase the impact these roles have on teaching and learning.

Program participants complete an online exit slip at the end of every course session. In addition to providing feedback on context, process, and content of each session — foundational components of Learning Forward’s Standards for Professional Learning (Learning Forward, 2011) — the exit slips provide an opportunity for participants to think about what might make it easy or hard to put their skills to use in their schools.

Analyzing data gathered from spring 2011 to fall 2012, program leaders saw clear patterns emerging in the contextual conditions teacher leaders perceived as critical to their effectiveness. Four conditions were salient in their responses: a common vision of shared leadership, clarity around authority, trust, and time.

SHARED LEADERSHIP

Principals regularly assign teachers to roles that are vital to school improvement, such as team leader, content coach, data facilitator, or mentor. While these teacher leaders may each have their own vision of how their work within their teams will contribute to improvement, they recognize the need to understand how that vision coordinates with work at the school level as well. In schools where teacher leaders and their administrators share a common vision for shared leadership, teacher leaders feel they have more traction for making a difference through their roles.

Teacher leaders in the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program reported that when their efforts were explicitly aligned with a schoolwide plan, they experienced increased collegial support, trust, and collaboration. This was true within their teacher teams and for the school overall. Not only did “everything seem to run smoothly,” as one teacher described it, but teacher leaders were more likely to feel confident, motivated,

GUIDING QUESTIONS ABOUT

SHARED LEADERSHIP

Structured discussions that focus on alignment across levels of school leadership can help teacher leaders make a bigger difference in their roles.

- Do key leaders in your school have the same vision of improvement?
- Do they have a shared conception of what it takes to get there?
- Does your school have opportunities for leaders to talk about this to get on the same page?

AUTHORITY

Through dialogue with other school leaders, teacher leaders can fulfill their responsibilities with a clear sense of authority.

- Has the leadership team thought about how leadership is distributed in the school and whether strategic actions can improve how this is done?
- Do key leaders in your school sometimes find they are duplicating efforts or stepping on toes?
- Is there a place to talk about this?

TRUST

To achieve school improvement objectives, leaders must collaborate in coordinating their approaches to promoting trust within a school.

- Do key leaders in your school discuss openly the importance of trust?
- Is trust an issue in your school? Do you know how to tell if it is or is not?
- Do leaders share responsibility for monitoring and promoting trust?

TIME

School administrators and teacher leaders must consult together in order to devise strategies for maximizing the use of available time.

- Have key leaders in your school already reviewed the literature for creative ideas at work in schools to address this pervasive issue?
- Have leaders explored the ways that our time is influenced by our values?
- Do leaders have a clear idea of what responsibility they have to ensure that time is being used effectively?
- Do leaders have strategies for improving the use of time?

and satisfied in their roles.

Another teacher noted additional benefits: “Working together to create a common vision can improve collaboration and trust.” These are prerequisites for shared ownership of student learning results.

However, where schools lacked a coordinated vision of leadership, teachers were acutely aware of dysfunction within their teams, and they were frequently frustrated that they weren’t as effective as they felt they could be.

Teacher leaders who reported that their principals made shared leadership a priority in their approach to schoolwide issues explained that one way they accomplished this was through frequent and open communication of goals. They would, for example, ensure there was a clear, common goal and vision for staff involvement and engagement, content and structure of professional learning, organization of staff meeting time, protocols for data use, and systematic support and time for inquiry and reflection.

Teacher leaders regularly work with colleagues to gain consensus around a common vision and goals within their own teams. However, teacher leaders can make a bigger difference for students when this vision is aligned across all levels of school leadership. To accomplish this, school leaders — both administrators and teacher leaders — must take time to engage in discussions about what shared leadership means and looks like in their school.

AUTHORITY

When teacher leaders are asked to assume roles and responsibilities beyond their classrooms, many agree to do so because they believe they can make a bigger difference in their schools. They have a tremendous sense of agency and the will to lead school improvement efforts. Many of them, however, experience a lack of clarity around their authority as teacher leaders.

Shared ownership benefits all. As one teacher noted, “Leadership opportunities increase a sense of ownership in teaching and learning, and it is a great feeling for teachers to know that they have helped improve student performance. It motivates teachers to want to do more, so it is a great benefit for the administration.” Ultimately, these efforts to improve teaching and learning benefit students. Yet it is not uncommon for teachers to be stymied by the lack of clarity about their authority within these roles. While some are undeterred by this lack of clarity, preferring to ask for forgiveness instead of permission, most teacher leaders find this to be an unnecessary source of stress.

Teacher leaders in the program indicated that clarity around authority was crucial to fulfilling their responsibilities confidently and feeling positive about their roles. Many teacher leaders want the freedom to manage teams, wishing administrators would show more faith and confidence in the teacher leaders without

FOR MORE INFORMATION

To read more about the Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program, see “Checks and balances: Built-in data routines monitor the impact of Boston’s teacher leader program” in the October 2013 issue of *JSD*, available at www.learningforward.org/publications/jsd.

micromanaging. Others appreciated the support they received in these areas. Still others described hesitating to take a needed action because they were unsure of the boundaries of their authority. They weren’t all looking for autonomy; they were looking for clarity. One participant said, “It is very frustrating when you know your potential and skills aren’t being used efficiently.”

Through dialogue, administrators and teacher leaders can clarify expectations and preferences. Administrators can support teacher leaders’ sense of authority by initiating a conversation in which they determine together the expected contributions of the teacher leader within the wider distribution of leadership and the actions that will be taken to ensure follow-through and accountability for all members of the leadership team.

A conversation with school administrators would help teacher leaders know that they are meeting agreed-upon expectations and their work is considered useful. To achieve a shared understanding of responsibilities and authority, as one teacher said, “a truly open and honest dialogue and intent is crucial.”

TRUST

Teacher leaders from the program recognize that trust creates a culture where information and ideas are more readily shared. This is important not merely because it enables teachers to share expertise and learn from one another’s experiences, but because it supports shared vision and aligned efforts.

One teacher leader said, “The work around building trust definitely help[s] with improving the various teams’ capacities to collaboratively work to improve student learning.”

Trust is a key tool in teamwork that allows teams to get more done in the long run.

Additionally, some teacher leaders described the ways in which trust facilitates professional growth: Trust is essential for truthful evaluation feedback as well as for creating the structures and space for teacher leaders to grow. Trust provides a foundation for the feedback and transparency needed to facilitate clearly defined authority and cooperation. Indeed, trust, authority, and shared vision interact to create high- and low-stakes situations that either inspire or inhibit collaboration.

Many of the interactions that are most conducive to school improvement require trust, yet these cannot be safely initiated with-

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out all levels of leadership on board. Teacher leaders and other school leaders should be aligned in their approaches to promoting trust within a school and their commitment to building trust among themselves. This requires conversation.

TIME

Time is the most commonly cited constraint by teacher leaders in the program. They struggle with having sufficient time to do all they feel they need to do, and they view this issue in two ways. Teacher leaders recognize that since time is a limited resource, existing time must be maximized. At the same time, they do want more time for the background work that is needed to support effective practice through their roles.

Teacher leaders in the program realize the importance of using existing time well. In their courses, they were concerned with how meetings can be organized so that participants are prepared, priorities are discussed up front, conversations are focused, and adequate time is allowed for reflection. They helped one another with this challenge by exchanging strategies, such as asking team members to complete surveys before meeting or asking them to draft a vision statement or goals before meeting so they can launch right into discussion when the meeting begins. But they often found the use of time in their meetings was not fully in their control. One teacher lamented, “Our common planning time is already booked with agendas.”

Of course, planning to use time well takes time, too. One teacher pined for “having enough time to create the agenda and organize the materials before the meeting.” The need to create more time seems inescapable. In addition to having time to prepare for the meetings they lead, these teacher leaders repeatedly expressed the desire for more time to engage in professional learning with colleagues, connect around collaborative planning, observe each other’s teaching, and reflect upon teaching or learning data.

One teacher said, “It is hard to put these systems in place at school because there is always that lack of time. The meetings fly by, and it is nearly impossible to meet with my team during the school day.” Further, time is required to prepare colleagues for this work. As one teacher explained, there is a “need for the group to develop other skills before they are able to sanely discuss the data or to look at student work.”

While some leadership teams are experimenting with innovative solutions that increase the time available for teacher leadership work, it’s also worthwhile for teacher leaders and school leaders to consult together to maximize how existing time is used.

ENTERING THE DISCUSSION

Conversations about these conditions are necessary, but significant barriers exist. Teacher leaders are often unsure how to approach principals about these topics. Principals do not always recognize these areas as ones that call for conversation or have not thought about how to enter into these discussions.

ABOUT THE PROGRAM

The Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program was established in 2010 through a federally funded Teacher Quality Partnership grant that included the Boston Plan for Excellence, Boston Teacher Residency, Boston Public Schools, and the University of Massachusetts, Boston. The program is now led by a governing board of teachers and has expanded beyond Boston through a partnership with Teachers21.

In response, Boston Teacher Leadership Certificate program leaders used what they learned from teacher leaders to create a series of discussion guides designed to generate productive, focused conversations among school leadership teams — administrators and teacher leaders together — and to result in more efficient and effective use of teacher leadership as a resource for reform.

The four guides address the conditions critical to teacher leaders’ success: shared leadership, authority, trust, and time. Each guide has four parts that users may adapt based on their needs, available time, and range of participants. The first segment offers the evidence-based rationale for the guide. After reviewing this, users can skim the materials and agree on how to adapt the guide to their needs.

Part two includes a short text and discussion questions to help teams consider the issue’s scope and complexity. Next is an action-oriented task that allows users to explore the topic together and develop shared understandings before outlining next steps. Finally, a structure guides users to reflect on progress and process.

Organizational theorists point out that “to achieve collective interpretation, people need time to understand the reasoning behind different perspectives and to question and think about that reasoning” (Collinson & Cook, 2007, p. 78). These guides can support teacher leaders, their principals, and the other leaders with whom they work to discuss and take action toward creating conditions that maximize leadership capacity.

REFERENCES

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